

St. Jerome Parish's Centennial Pilgrimage to the Holy Land November 1 – 12, 2011

Most people know that there are four Gospels; Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. What most people don't know is that there is a "fifth Gospel" as well. That fifth Gospel is the land itself. That land, made sacred by Jesus, which we call the Holy Land. Walking through this land is like reading the Gospel stories all over again, through its rocks and stones, rivers and lakes, hills and valleys, towns and villages. This land makes the Gospel stories come alive in our minds and in our hearts. When we walk the streets of Jerusalem, when we stand at the shore of the Sea of Galilee, when we wander the roads of Bethlehem, Nazareth or Cana, when we stand on the summit of Mount Tabor, we are able to ponder the great mysteries of the life of Christ more deeply, with greater awe, wonder and understanding. My hope is that, as you read this account of our journey, your hearts can be touched in some way by our experience. As we the pilgrims from St. Jerome, allow these great mysteries to unfold in us in a deeper way, may they also unfold in you more deeply, as you share in our story. May you encounter Jesus as we did.

Day 1, Tuesday, November 1, 2011

We begin our pilgrimage, flying from Chicago to Tel Aviv, Israel. 28 people fly to Tel Aviv with Iberia Airlines via Madrid; 20 people fly to Tel Aviv with British Airways via London.

Day 2, Wednesday, November 2, 2011

Both groups arrive in Tel Aviv around 3:30 in the afternoon. We are met at Ben Gurion International Airport by Samir, a representative from Tekton Ministries and Garabedien Tours (who organized our pilgrimage for us). Samir helps us with getting our baggage and clearing customs. Our local guide, Fr. David Wathen, OFM is waiting for us at the airport as well. Fr. David is an American Franciscan priest, belonging to the Holy Land Custody, and is a licensed guide in the State of Israel. He is with us from the moment we arrive to the moment of our departure. We then drive for about an hour, to our hotel in Jerusalem, the **Notre Dame Center**, which is owned by the Vatican and run by the Legionnaires of Christ. The Notre Dame Center is an impressive stone building, located across the street from the walled Old City of Jerusalem. In fact it is the closest hotel to the Old City, with the New Gate, and access to the Christian Quarter of the Old City just across the street.

Day 3, Thursday, November 3, 2011

We begin our first full day in the Holy Land on the **Mount of Olives**. First we go to **Pater Noster Church** (Our Father in Latin), where Jesus taught His disciples to pray the Our Father. We spend some time in the garden of the Pater Noster church, where Fr. David offers some explanations. The walls of the church and courtyard are adorned with 140 large, colorful, ceramic tile plaques, each of which has the words of the Our Father in a different language. We find the Our Father plaques both in English and Croatian, and together we pray this prayer in both languages. We are already walking in the footsteps of Jesus. One of the things we immediately learn is that Jesus was very intentional about everything He did, everything He said, and everywhere He went. Pater Noster Church is located on the western slope of the Mount of Olives. Just a few miles away, on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives lies the town of Bethany. The name Bethany comes from the Aramaic words *beth*, which means "house of", and the word *Ani*, which means "affliction". So "Bethany" means *house of affliction*. This meaning seems to relate to the use of the village as a center for caring for the sick, very possibly also lepers. And we know clearly that the Jewish community of Jesus' time viewed those with afflictions as being unclean, and therefore unable to have access to the Jewish Temple for prayer and sacrifice. They were effectively cut off from contact with God because of their affliction. It is precisely there, just a few miles from this village, that Jesus teaches His disciples the Our Father. What He is saying through this action is that EVERYONE is invited into a relationship with God, and that in the eyes of God, there is no "clean" and "unclean". All are invited, but not all will respond to His invitation. Will you? This fifth Gospel is already teaching us a powerful lesson as we reflect on the Lord's Prayer. As we walk, the Gospels come alive. We read the Gospel passage about this prayer in Luke 11:1-4.

Next we proceed to the **Palm Sunday road**, which Jesus walked upon when He made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. To our left we see a large Jewish cemetery, and the Old City in front of us. This Jewish cemetery is the oldest cemetery in the world where burials go back 2400 years ago. Many prophets are buried here including the Prophet Zachariah. We stop at **Dominus Flevit** (Latin for "the Lord Wept"), the church that marks the spot where Jesus wept over Jerusalem because He knew that the people would not accept Him. The church is shaped like a teardrop to represent

Jesus' tears. We gather in front of Dominus Fleuit, where we have an excellent view of the entire Old City and surrounding areas. The city of Jerusalem lies before us as if on the palm of our hands. When you come here and sit on this spot, you understand why Jesus wept here. It seems to me I could sit here for days. The Gospel passage that speaks of this event is Luke 19:41-45: *"As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, He wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace--but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."* I am speechless. What Jesus prophesied, happened and to this day it is the same. Many still do not recognize Him.

Fr. David points out the entire path that Jesus walked, from His Last Supper to His resurrection. Seeing it all before us somehow makes it all so much more real. We cannot believe that we walk the same path. After Dominus Fleuit, we continue walking down the Palm Sunday road to two sites that are right next to each other. The first is the **Grotto of Betrayal**, where the Apostles slept while Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane. It was also at this place that Jesus was arrested when Judas betrayed Him with a kiss. We stand in the very place which is described in John 18:1-10: *Jesus went out with His disciples across the Kidron valley to where there was a garden, into which He and His disciples entered. Judas His betrayer also knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with His disciples. So Judas got a band of soldiers and guards from the chief priests and the Pharisees and went there with lanterns, torches, and weapons. Jesus, knowing everything that was going to happen to Him, went out and said to them, "Whom are you looking for? They answered him, "Jesus the Nazorean."* He said to them, "I AM." Judas his betrayer was also with them. When He said to them, "I AM," they turned away and fell to the ground.*

Adjacent to the Grotto is the **Tomb of Mary**, where tradition holds that Mary was buried after she "fell asleep", and from where she was assumed into heaven. Many people walk down there, but I personally refuse to go there because the Orthodox priests who maintain the site, keep it dirty, dingy and filthy. It's sad because my image of Mary is one of purity, simplicity and holiness.

Our final stop of the morning is to the **Garden of Gethsemane**, where I celebrate Mass for our group inside the **Basilica of the Agony**, which is also sometimes called the **Church of All Nations** (because many nations contributed financially to its construction). Gethsemane comes from the Hebrew word for "oil press" because the Mount of Olives was full of olive trees, which were pressed to make olive oil. We gather around the **Rock of Agony**, where Jesus suffered His agony in the Garden. After Mass we take our first group picture, in front of the olive grove, in the Garden of Gethsemane. This is a very powerful place to be. We ourselves cannot believe that we stand and kneel at the place where Jesus Himself stood and knelt. Interestingly enough, I met Fr. Bernard, a Franciscan from Zagreb who is stationed here. He arrived just a month and a half ago.

After Mass we board our bus and return to the Notre Dame Center for lunch and a little rest. Some stay back at the Notre Dame, while others go with Fr. David to a falafel/shawarma place right inside the New Gate (this will be our standard lunch menu over the next 10 days, as it is in the entire Middle East).

In the afternoon, we drive to **Ein Kerem**, about a 20-minute drive from our hotel. First we climb the hill to visit the **Church of the Visitation**, where Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth, and where Mary spoke her famous "Magnificat" (My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord/Veliča duša moja Gospodina). In the courtyard we again see colorful plaques with this great prayer written in different languages. We find both the Croatian plaque and the English one. They happen to be right next to each other. St. Luke describes this in detail in chapter 1:39-56.

This Judean countryside is beautiful, quite different from Jerusalem. It's all green, with picturesque hills and valleys. The church that marks the site of the Visitation is high up on a hill. At the bottom of the hill is a well that is called Mary's well. The water is still fresh and running.

Next we walk back down the hill and visit the **Church of St. John the Baptist**, where John was born. Again we see plaques on the walls of the courtyard, with the prayer of his father Zachariah, which is known as Zachariah's Canticle, found in Luke 1:67-79. We find the American and Croatian plaques. Inside the church we are able to venerate the place of John's birth, marked by a star, located in a lower level crypt chapel to the left of the main altar. After Ein Kerem, we drive to **Bethlehem** to do some shopping at a shop owned by several Palestinian Christian families.

We begin our day by driving the short distance from the Notre Dame Center to **Lions gate**, also called **St. Stephens gate** (site where St. Stephen was martyred, on the orders of Saul - who later became St. Paul). Upon entering the Old City, our first stop is the **Church of St. Anne**, where tradition holds that the Virgin Mary was born. First we visit the lower level cave, believed to be the place of her birth. Then we return to the upper level, where we sing Zdravo Djevo and Immaculate Mary. This is the most acoustic church in the Holy Land. The acoustics are so perfect that the church is virtually a musical instrument to be played by the human voice. Pilgrim groups come to sing in the church because of this. Just imagine - this church was built in the 12th century. When you stand inside and hear the voices and see the stone structure, you just stand there in awe! Next to the church are the ruins of the **Pools of Bethesda**, where Jesus cured a paralytic, which you can read about in John 5:1-15. John is very detailed in his account. The pool of Bethesda was a rainwater reservoir in ancient Jerusalem, to which people with a variety of illnesses would come because the waters were believed to have healing powers. It was here that Jesus healed the man who had been ill for 38 years. We read that passage and look upon the remains of the pool. Jesus walked these very same paths. It is impossible to put this into words, in any language. Before leaving the Church of St. Anne, it begins to rain, so we huddle in a covered area by the entrance to the site. Nobody is bothered by this because our spirits are full of joy.

After the rain lets up a little bit, we proceed to the **Chapel of the Flagellation** and the **Chapel of Condemnation**, where we begin the **Via Dolorosa** (Latin for "Way of Suffering") and receive the cross that we ourselves carry through the streets of the Old City, following the path that Jesus took on His way to Calvary. We pray the first nine Stations of the Cross while walking through the streets of Jerusalem, taking turns carrying the cross. We pray this Via Dolorosa as we pass by vendors, shops, garbage piles, filth on the streets and the general chaos of this tightly packed city. The streets of Jerusalem feel, smell and look like they did in the time of Jesus. The crowds, the shouting, the spitting, the disrespect, filth all around...it is so easy to feel and understand Good Friday. Again this fifth Gospel teaches a lesson because this was exactly as it was in Jesus' time. We see that in fact, nothing has changed. We pray the last five Stations of the Cross in the **Church of the Holy Sepulcher**, at Calvary. This day we spend in Jerusalem feels like Good Friday, it is a cloudy, rainy, overcast, depressing day. Interestingly enough, every other day we spend here is sunny and beautiful. After completing the Via Dolorosa, Fr. David takes us around the Church of the Holy Sepulcher to show us around and explain to us everything that is inside of it.

The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is the place of Jesus' crucifixion, death and resurrection. This is the holiest site in all of Christianity. We touch the stone of Calvary, where Jesus was crucified. Silence. Whispered prayers. Encased in glass is the rock of Calvary, which split in two at the time of Jesus' death (due to an earthquake). We descend from Calvary to touch the stone of anointing, where His dead body was anointed in preparation for His burial. A few feet away a perpetual candle marks the place where Mary and the women of Jerusalem looked upon the crucified Christ. We stand in silent awe as we contemplate what their eyes beheld and what their hearts endured. Just a few feet away we visit the empty tomb of Jesus. Words are insufficient. Silence alone can speak here. Close to Jesus' tomb, we can see the tombs where bodies of criminals were thrown. A hundred yards away from the tomb of Jesus is the place where Mary Magdalene met the Risen Christ. How amazing it is to reflect on the incredible joy of that encounter, at the site where it actually happened. The fifth Gospel speaks to us every place we go. Two levels down, deep in the earth is the chapel of St. Helena, the place where St. Helena found the True Cross upon which Jesus was crucified. St. Helena found three crosses at that site. According to tradition, in order to identify which of these three crosses was the True Cross of Christ, she brought a sick man to the place and touched him with the wood of each of these three crosses. The touch of one of the crosses healed him. In that way, she was able to identify the True Cross of Christ. What a powerful lesson to ponder – the healing power of the Cross of Christ.

We take another group picture on the steps just outside of the church. Outside the church we meet a young woman, Ivana, from the University of Split Medical School. Interesting. She joins us for the rest of the day. We then have lunch at an outdoor falafel/shawarma place in the Old City.

After lunch we walk through the Jewish quarter of the Old City (which is exceptionally clean) and make our way to the **Western Wall**, or **Wailing Wall** as it is also called. We pass through security and spend some time at the Wall, which is an open air synagogue and a most sacred place for Jews. The men and women's prayer spaces are segregated at the Wall - men on the left side, women on the right side. According to Jewish tradition, this is the site where God requested that Abraham sacrifice his son Isaac upon a rock. The great Temple of Jerusalem was built over this rock, and the Ark of the Covenant was kept in its Holy of Holies. It became the holiest place in the entire world for Jews. The site is significant for Christians as well because Jesus was presented in this Temple after His birth, and in His later years, He often visited

and prayed at the Jerusalem Temple. The Temple was totally destroyed in 70 AD by the Roman army and the Jews were never again allowed to rebuild it. The Western Wall is the only remnant of that great Jewish Temple, and Jews revere it as a place where God dwells with them in a very special way, already for thousands of years. Today, the golden domed mosque, called the Dome of the Rock, stands on that site. After leaving the Western Wall, we get caught in the rain again as we make our way to **Zion gate**, where we exit the Old City, and make our way to the area of Jerusalem called **Mount Zion**.

Our first stop on Mount Zion is the site that commemorates the **Upper Room**. This site is not the actual Upper Room, but is built over the area that it is believed the Upper Room was located. Next we visit **Dormition Abbey**, where it is believed that Mary "fell asleep." We visit both the upper and lower part of the church. In the lower part of the church there is a statue of Mary "asleep". After this we proceed to our next site, the Franciscan chapel that commemorates the Upper Room, where Fr. Ivan celebrates Mass. The Franciscans built this chapel so that groups can have a place to celebrate Mass, in remembrance of the events that happened in the Upper Room.

After Mass we walk a few blocks to the area of Jerusalem called the **City of David**, where we visited the **Church of St. Peter Gallicantu**. The name Gallicantu means "the cock crows" in Latin. This church was built over the ruins of the palace of the high priest Caiaphas, where Jesus was held overnight after His arrest. It is also the place where Peter denied the Lord three times. Today a golden rooster protrudes prominently from the sanctuary roof. Next to the church are the "**Holy Stairs**". They were a main thoroughfare through ancient Jerusalem and were the way that Jesus would have walked to get to and from Caiaphas' house after His arrest. We look at them in silent awe. These are the steps upon which my Lord walked. This is the place where Jesus spent the last night of His earthly life, in a dark room, deep in the earth, waiting for His destiny to be decided by the men in power. This is a life changing moment. Silence is the best description of everyone's feelings. We get on the bus to go back to our hotel. It is a silent ride. Everyone is overwhelmed.

During dinner at the Notre Dame, Fr. Ivan runs into bishop Paul Swain, of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Bishop Swain was Fr. Ivan's pastor in his home town of Madison, Wisconsin. Interesting.

After dinner we are given a rare gift, we are able to return to Gethsemane to spend an hour by ourselves around the Rock of Agony. No crowds, no noise, no flashing cameras, no other pilgrims. Just silence, stillness, the somberness of night, Jesus in the Eucharist, and us. First we are allowed to walk in the Garden among the olive trees, to touch them and spend time with them. These same olive trees have been there since the time of Jesus. The locals call them the "silent witnesses" to Jesus' agony. We walk in silence. Then we all go to the church. We gather around the Rock of Agony, which is where Jesus prayed and cried out to His Father in Heaven. I preside over an hour of adoration. We pray in silence. The Eucharist on the altar before us, the Rock of Agony at our feet. We whisper our intentions in the solitude of our hearts. We sing "Jesus Remember Me." I remind the people that despite the limitless universe, the countless planets and stars, God knows my name. I ask everybody to say their name out loud, as a way of presenting themselves to Christ. Most of us cry, and everyone feels the presence of Christ Himself. We all fall to our knees to touch the rock and offer our prayers to Christ.

This Friday in Jerusalem is never to be forgotten. How could it be? This is the place and the day when everything comes together: the Gospels, the city of Jerusalem and us. I thought I could find words to describe every human experience, but not now, not here. I am happy, everybody is happy to be called a Christian. Not to be connected with Jesus is to have an empty life. This Friday, November 4, 2011, will be forever imprinted in our souls. Hopefully each one of us will be able to inspire others by our own experience.

Day 5, Saturday, November 5, 2011

Every morning I invite our pilgrims to join me at 5:30 am to walk to the Holy Sepulcher to visit the tomb of Jesus, to go again to Calvary. Most of them do this faithfully every morning during our stay in Jerusalem. At 8:00 am we board our bus to make our way to **Bethlehem**. Bethlehem means "*house of bread*" (*beth means "house", lehem means "of bread"*). Isn't that interesting that Jesus, who calls Himself our "Bread of Life" (John 6) and gives Himself to us under the appearance of bread in the Eucharist, is born in a town which means "house of bread"? Remember when I wrote earlier that everything is intentional? We see that again here. Bethlehem is only about 5 miles away, located in the West Bank, but it takes about 40 minutes to get there due to the checkpoints. We cross into the West Bank, passing through the separation wall built by Israel (which is 25 feet high). Immediately we notice that it is a different environment. We go straight to the **Basilica of the Nativity**. This church, built by St. Helena, is the oldest, still functioning church in the

world. You can enter it only through a very short door (about 3 feet high), which was built to stop Muslim invaders from riding into the church on horseback and desecrating the church. We proceed immediately down to the **Grotto of St. Jerome**. This is a very important place for us. This is the place where St. Jerome lived as a hermit, translating the Bible into Latin, and where he died. He was buried here in 420 AD. Our parish, which celebrates its 100-year anniversary, is named for him. I preside at Mass in this small, intimate crypt chapel. It is a powerful and moving place. The Croatian ambassador to Israel, Zorica Matkovic, joins us this day. Many of St. Jerome's parishioners know her well because she was Counsel General in Chicago for five years. At the end of Mass, I bless everyone with a statue of the baby Jesus, the bambino Jesu. This is the only place in the world where this is done.

After Mass, we go up to the main level of the church where we stand in line for an hour and forty-five minutes to visit the **Grotto of the Nativity**. No one complains. Everyone is excited to see and venerate the place where Jesus was born. One by one, we touch and kiss the place of His birth, which is marked by a silver star on the ground. Then we visit the **Manger Grotto**, immediately adjacent to it, where Jesus was laid in the manger. Everybody is deeply moved. After venerating the place of His birth, and where He was laid in the manger, we move to the back of the Nativity Grotto chapel, and sing "Silent Night/Tiha Noc" while facing the place of His birth. Goosebumps. Tears. Smiles. Joy. Happiness. Peace. Gratitude. I wish you all could come here one day. Then we go outside to the courtyard. Fr. David explains the history of the entire complex. We take a group picture by the statue of St. Jerome, and then we enter the church of St. Catherine, run by the Franciscan Friars, from where Midnight Mass is televised every year throughout the world. What a beautiful church! On the right side of the altar is the statue of the "bambino Jesu", the baby Jesus, which is used for Christmas every year. We meet Fr. Jago Soce, a Croatian Franciscan who serves in Bethlehem. He teaches piano and is in charge of the choir. We observe a procession of Franciscan friars, who process daily from St. Catherine's church to the Grotto of the Nativity. Then we walk through the streets of Bethlehem to the **Milk Grotto**, which is a few minutes away from the church of the Nativity. According to tradition, the Holy Family took refuge here during the slaughter of the innocents, before their flight into Egypt. There is also an old tradition that identifies this as the burial site of all the young victims of Herod's slaughter of the innocents. Behind the church is a chapel of perpetual adoration.

Then we visit Ruth at her restaurant. Ruth has made shish kabobs, falafel, shawarma, hummus, and many other Palestinian specialties for us. We all eat too much. Jewish beer is good. The wine is even better. The definition of homemade is very appropriate in this land. After lunch we walk uphill about 300 feet, to **Shepherd's Field**. On the night of Jesus' birth, the shepherd's were outside, in what is now called Shepherd's Field. This was the place where the shepherds heard the angels singing "Glory to God in the highest, and peace to men of goodwill" (Luke 2:8-20). The church is interestingly built. The shepherd's were believed to be Bedouins and so the church is meant to resemble a Bedouin tent. The walls of the church have Latin quotes, taken from St. Luke's Gospel, related to the story of the shepherd's. In the surrounding hills, we see interesting scenery, where today, in 2011, we still see shepherd's tending their sheep. Time stands still. On the same hill, we see the ruins of a 4th century church.

We return to the Notre Dame Center for the evening. Some people go back to the Old City to visit the Holy Sepulcher again, but most of us reflect on the events of the day. I was invited to dinner at St. Savior monastery, the main Franciscan place in the Holy Land. The Franciscan's have been the guardians of the holy sites in this land for the last 800 years. I meet with the custos of the Holy Land, Fr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, a very pleasant Franciscan brother. I also meet with Fr. Miron Sikiric who is a professor of Canon Law at the Franciscan University in Jerusalem. We went to school together. I also met with Fra Antonio from my province and Fra Sandro from Zagreb, both of whom are students here. We seem to keep running into people that we know here. Hmmm. It is very interesting to meet the oldest Friar, who said, "I am Padre Gabriele from Jordan. I am 100 years old," as well as Fr. Xavier, an American priest who is 89 years old, from Hamilton, Ohio. He came here in 1956. When he found out that I came from Chicago, he said "I was a tour guide to Mayor Dailey in the 1970's." The monastery building is 500 years old. Eighty Franciscan students, professors, archeologists, biblical scholars and priests in general, live in this monastery, from 51 different countries. The official language is Italian. The sense of community is tangible. Fr. Miron takes me up on the roof of the monastery where the whole city of Jerusalem lay before me.

Day 6, Sunday, November 6, 2011

At 7:30 am we drive to **Bethany**, located just on the other side of the Mount of Olives. This is the village, which was Jesus' home away from home, where His close friends Martha, Mary and Lazarus lived. The **Church of Martha, Mary and Lazarus** is built on the ruins of their home. Beautiful garden area, flowers, lovely scent, paths. You could feel the presence of these two beautiful women, Martha and Mary. Fr. Ivan presides at the Mass. We see the entrance to Lazarus' tomb. This is the place where Jesus proclaimed Himself to be the Resurrection and the Life. This is the site of the last of

seven signs in John's Gospel (John 1:1-44). By raising Lazarus from the dead, He talked about His own Resurrection, and ours as well. On the other hand, the Bethany of today is a predominantly Muslim town. It is filthy and dirty. There are no hospitals or medical centers, the roads are poor, and poverty is all around us, but the mosque which is being built, financed by some Middle Eastern prince, costs 30 million dollars! Hard to understand. Right next to the church, the Muslims built a mosque and named it the Mosque of Lazarus. It is ridiculous. Unfortunately we see this at almost every sacred Christian shrine we visit – a mosque is built immediately adjacent to it, with its minaret being intentionally taller than the steeple of the church. The message is hard to miss.

As soon as we leave Bethany, we enter the Judean desert. We see the Bedouin camps on the side of the road. This road takes us along the Dead Sea, on our way to **Masada**. We take a cable car up to Masada, which is 1300 feet high, however, because we are at the lowest point on earth (the Dead Sea), Masada is actually only 32 feet above sea level. The word Masada comes from the Hebrew word *metzudo* which means “fortress, and is the name of a site of ancient palaces and fortifications in the South District of Israel, on top of an isolated rock plateau, on the eastern edge of the Judean Desert, overlooking the Dead Sea. Masada is best known for the violence that occurred there in the first century CE. In the final accords of the First Jewish-Roman War, a Siege of Masada by troops of the Roman Empire led to the mass suicide of the Jewish rebels (960 people). They made a bold statement by preferring death at their own hands to imprisonment and/or slavery at the hands of the conquering Roman armies. This is a holy site for Jewish people. It is at this site that the Israeli military holds its swearing in ceremonies. It is a symbol of Jewish resistance and perseverance. From the top of this hill we see the entire Judean desert, the Dead Sea, the country of Jordan, Mount Nebo – from where Moses saw the Promised Land, and where he died. From Masada we drive to a kibbutz for lunch (a kibbutz is a collective community in Israel that was traditionally based on agriculture). The kibbutz is immediately adjacent to our next destination – **Qumran**, where in 1947 a local Bedouin boy made the single greatest discovery of ancient manuscripts in the 20th century. The boy was looking for his sheep, and thought they had wandered into a cave, so he threw a rock into that cave and heard something break. Inside he found some pots, inside of which were hidden some scrolls. These scrolls contain the text of all of the books of the Old Testament, other than the book of Esther. No New Testament books were found. These manuscripts are the oldest copies of the Old Testament ever discovered. These documents are called the **Dead Sea Scrolls**. Since the discovery from 1947 to 1956 of nearly 900 scrolls in various conditions, mostly written on parchment, with others on papyrus, extensive excavations of the settlement have been undertaken. Cisterns, Jewish ritual baths, and cemeteries have been found, along with a dining or assembly room and debris from an upper story alleged by some to have been a scriptorium as well as pottery kilns and a tower. Many scholars believe the location to have been home to a Jewish sect, the Essenes. Many also believe that John the Baptist spent some time with this Essene community before beginning his ministry along the shores of the Jordan river.

We are back on our bus to a most exotic and fascinating place, the **Dead Sea**. The Dead Sea isn't actually a Sea at all. The Dead Sea is a saltwater lake. There is no life of any kind in the Dead Sea. The high mineral and salt content of the waters make it impossible for fish or plants to live. The Dead Sea is the second saltiest body of water in the world, with a salt content of 33%. You can lie on the surface of the water without even trying to float. The high salt content makes you buoyant. Water flows into the Dead Sea from streams and rivers, but does not flow out. Dead Sea salt is extremely bitter and not at all like table salt. The Dead Sea is filled with minerals including calcium, iodine, saline, potassium, and bromide. The minerals in the Dead Sea all naturally occur within our bodies. Cleopatra loved the Dead Sea so much, she ordered that cosmetic factories and resorts be built along its shores. To this day, creams and lotions from the Dead Sea are still extremely popular. Egyptians used mud from the Dead Sea in their mummification of the deceased. The climate of the Dead Sea region is sunny, warm and dry all year round. Both Jesus and John the Baptist are closely tied to the Dead Sea in biblical writings. The shores of the Dead Sea mark the lowest elevation on earth. The Dead Sea is 3 million years old. The unique salt in the Dead Sea treats acne, psoriasis, hives, cellulite, dry skin, dandruff, stress, muscle aches, and more.

Most of us go into the Sea. It was unlike any other swimming experience any of us have had. It's very difficult to walk in the water because the bottom is slimy, muddy and full of sudden sink holes. So many of us crawled in on our hands and knees. No one swims in the Dead Sea. You just float. You have to be very careful not to get any of the water in your eyes or mouth, because it will be very painful due to the salt content. The mud from the sea floor has very healing and curative properties, so everyone covers themselves in this mud from head to feet. After just 20 minutes with this mud on our bodies, our skin becomes silky smooth. What an experience. Everybody looks 10 years younger. Hahaha.

After our relaxing afternoon at the Dead Sea, we drive back to our hotel in Jerusalem. We have a special event this evening to which we are invited. George Garabedian Tours is the local Jerusalem travel agency that works with Tekton Ministries to coordinate our pilgrimage, and to make sure that everything runs smoothly. George Garabedian invited our

entire group to a special “goodbye to Jerusalem” dinner at their hotel, the **Christmas Hotel**. We had a delicious meal and warm hospitality.

We had a lovely surprise encounter that evening at dinner. I met a man there, who shared a very touching story with me, that I asked him to share with our entire group. His name is Keith Larson, he is a retired US Naval captain, and he belongs to the Order of the Templars. He told us the story of Peter Herceg Tomich, a Croat from Prolog, near Ljubuski, in Hercegovina. Peter enlisted in the U.S. Navy in January 1919, where he initially served on the destroyer Litchfield. By 1941, he had become a Chief Watertender on board the training and target ship the U.S.S. Utah. When that ship was torpedoed by the Japanese raid on Pearl Harbor, on December 7, 1941, Tomich was on duty in the boiler room. As the Utah began to capsize, he remained below, securing the boilers and making certain that other men escaped, and so lost his life. For his "distinguished conduct and extraordinary courage" he was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. His medal of Honor citation says the following: *"For distinguished conduct in the line of his profession, and extraordinary courage and disregard of his own safety, during the attack on the Fleet in Pearl Harbor by the Japanese forces on 7 December 1941. Although realizing that the ship was capsizing, as a result of enemy bombing and torpedoing, Tomich remained at his post in the engineering plant of the U.S.S. Utah, until he saw that all boilers were secured and all fireroom personnel had left their stations, and by so doing lost his own life."* Though he was posthumously awarded a Medal of Honor somehow that Medal was never presented to his family. This mistake was rectified on May 18, 2006, when the Medal of Honor was presented to Tomich's family on the aircraft carrier, the U.S.S. Enterprise, in the southern Adriatic city of Split, Croatia, 64 years after US President Franklin D. Roosevelt awarded it to him. Mr. Larson, the man sharing this story with us, was instrumental in ensuring that Tomich's family was given his Medal of Honor. Everyone is moved by this story.

Day 7, Monday, November 7, 2011

At 6:00 am we all walk to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. I say Mass for our group at Calvary at 6:30 am. No need for preaching, explanations or homilies. Silence is spoken here. Whispered intentions, memories of Gospel stories come to life. We are saying goodbye to Jerusalem, the city of Jesus' final days, where we feel at home. Honestly, it was difficult to say goodbye. We are back to the hotel for a quick breakfast. During breakfast, Fr. Eamon Kelly comes to say goodbye to our group. Fr. Eamon is an Irish priest, belonging to the Legionnaires of Christ, and is the assistant director of the Notre Dame Center. He surprises us with a greeting in Croatian, which he learned when he spent some time in Zagreb and Medjugorje. He sends us on our way with a beautiful prayer of blessing upon us. We are sad to leave, but we know that many more more powerful moments are awaiting us as we trek to northern Israel, to the Sea of Galilee area, where Jesus' public ministry was based. Sadness at leaving, excitement about what lies ahead. Powerful emotions in our hearts every day. We get our luggage, say goodbye to the Notre Dame Center, and leave Jerusalem behind us, but forever in our hearts.

We head towards Jericho. Fifteen minutes outside of Jerusalem, we make a left turn off of the main road, and drive right into the desert. We stop to climb a hill, where we have a spectacular view of St. George's monastery in a distant desert valley. No signs of life anywhere, other than one little Bedouin boy who appears out of nowhere selling his wares. He is all smiles as he sells every last bracelet he has to various people in our group. Cute. Everybody is shocked by the austerity of the desert. It is not the kind of desert one typically imagines. There is no sand anywhere. Rather, it is sand colored, rocky hills and valleys, as far as the eye can see. We continue driving until we pass through a Palestinian checkpoint, and then we arrive at the city of Jericho - the oldest known city in the world. We climb to the ruins of ancient **Jericho**, which is 10,000 years old. In 1250 BC, Joshua encircled the city and at the blast of the priests' trumpets, the walls came tumbling down (Joshua 6). Jesus passed through this city many times on His way to Jerusalem. We stopped by the sycamore fig tree, the tree that Zacchaeus climbed in order to catch a glimpse of Jesus. Then we ascend the **Mount of Temptation** with small cable cars. It is here that Jesus fasted and prayed for 40 days after His baptism in the Jordan River down below. On this Mount of Temptation, a Greek Orthodox monastery was built in the rock face, over the cave where Christ stayed during His time in the desert. I spoke with a Greek Orthodox monk there, who spent the last 35 years of his life in this monastery, but now he lives there alone. Try to imagine the Mount of Temptation, caves, monastery and solitude.

We leave Jericho to go to the **Jordan River**, the site of Jesus' baptism. This is also the natural border between Israel and Jordan. I renewed the baptismal promises for each one of us. Then everyone took turns stepping into the waters of the Jordan River, where I poured water on each of their heads, as a reminder of their own baptism. Powerful moment. We drive north through the West Bank towards Galilee, driving on the same road that was used in the time of Jesus. The only

difference is the asphalt below and the cars above. Everything else is the same. We go through the region of Samaria. The Samaritan people have long disappeared. They don't exist as a people anymore. We enter the region of the Galilee, which is just the opposite of Judea, its green, welcoming and pleasant. Soon we are at the **Sea of Galilee**, the home of Jesus' public ministry. We checked into our hotel, the **Leonardo Plaza**, located right on the Sea. The hotel staff was extremely welcoming, helpful and many times they said to me that if we needed anything at all, we need only ask. We are all surprised at how big and beautiful this hotel is, with high-class amenities and services and a seemingly never-ending array of foods at their breakfast and dinner buffets. There is a nightly light and water show (which was spectacular!) right on the Sea of Galilee in front of our hotel, which offers a pleasant welcome to us tonight. This experience adds to the beauty of our stay in the Holy Land. I check emails and update Facebook. I notice that 600, 700, 800, and once more than 1,000 people followed our pilgrimage on Facebook!

Day 8, Tuesday, November 8, 2011

One more day in the Land of Jesus. We start our day very interestingly. Imagine this: we get on a **boat** and spend an hour and half on the Sea of Galilee. We are surprised that when we board the ship the captain raises the American and Croatian flags and plays the national anthems of both countries. The feeling of that Sea is so overpowering; calm waters, silence, Gospel stories related to the Sea of Galilee coming to life as Fr. David reads them to us, then the ship's crew plays the song "How Great Thou Art." It resounds over the waters and in our hearts. Jesus preached from a boat like this one. His eyes beheld the same scenery as our eyes are now beholding. WOW! He calmed THIS SEA down during the storm. His disciples felt safe with Him in the boat when there was a storm on the Sea. He walked on the waters of this Sea. He reached for Peter to help him also walk on the water, when Peter began to sink due to his lack of trust in the Master. He spent time at her shores. There is a mystical quality to this place that is beyond the scope of words to describe. But we feel it in our hearts. As we look around, we see the simplicity of nature before us, without a lot of development anywhere. It truly must have looked almost exactly the same in the time of Jesus as it does now. Our boat docks on the shore very near to our next destination, **Capernaum**, known as the "Town of Jesus". After living in Nazareth (about 45 minutes away by bus) for His first 30 years of life, Jesus moved to Capernaum when He began His public ministry, and basically lived there, very likely in the home of His disciple Peter, who lived in Capernaum, 100 feet from the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Fr. Ivan celebrated Mass in the octagonal, glass church, which was built above the ruins of the house of St. Peter. We remembered all of your intentions at Mass, as we have done every day, especially those written in our Book of Intentions and in your e-mails and Facebook messages.

Very near to Peter's house is the synagogue, the same one Jesus preached in. Amazing! Seems unreal. You touch the same stones, walk the same roads, feel the same sun and wind. It was in this synagogue that Jesus preached one of His most important sermons for us as Catholics. This synagogue in Capernaum is the setting for Jesus' great discourse on the Bread of Life (John 6), where He said "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (John 6:53). He was speaking about His True Presence in the Eucharist. It is a powerful moment as we read this Gospel passage, right in the place where Jesus said those words Himself. After Capernaum, we drive to **Bethsaida**, which was the hometown of Peter, John and James. It is fascinating to see is that Jesus prophesized about the towns of Bethsaida, Korazim and Capernaum, saying that stone upon stone won't be left because the people of those towns didn't accept His message, and TODAY after two thousand years we can see those towns are still in ruins. You see only stones left from those times. POWERFUL! I cannot describe it in words. The Gospel comes alive here on these roads and stones, seas and rivers. Again, the fifth Gospel speaks to us so clearly.

We stop at a restaurant for lunch and we have St. Peter's fish, then we drive a short distance to **Tabgha**, the site of multiplication of the loaves and fish, the place by the Sea. In the church, we read the Gospel account where Jesus fed 5000 people. The locations of these sites are believed to be pretty accurate, thanks to archeological excavations that have been done, and thanks to the Franciscans of the Holy Land. The Franciscans have been here for 800 years guarding these holy places in times of peace, war and conflicts. It is a discovery for me as well how much my Franciscan brothers from every continent do in this very special Land. They are the guardians of the fifth Gospel, which was entrusted to their care by the Church soon after St. Francis walked this land. Our final stop on this most beautiful day is the **Mount of Beatitudes**. What a special place. The peace that is felt here truly is peace that passes understanding. Where Jesus dwells, peace is ever present. And so we feel that here. It is from this place that Jesus preached His most famous sermon, known as the Sermon on the Mount, which is found in Matthew, chapter 5-7. Perhaps the most well known words of His Sermon on the Mount are these, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart,*

for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:3-11) Scientists recently discovered why Jesus gave his famous sermon on this mountain even though there were many other hills and mountains in the area. It seems that this hill is one of the most acoustic hills in this region. Fascinating. Again, we see how intentional Jesus was in His choice of where He said what.

Day 9, Wednesday, November 9, 2011

At 8:00 am we drive to our first destination of the day, to the town of **Nazareth**, the place of the **Annunciation**, where it all began. We see Mary's house where an angel came to announce that she would become the Mother of God. She said YES! Every place we visit in the Land of Jesus serves as a most powerful teaching moment, so Nazareth teaches us two simple things that we learned from Mary. First, saying YES to God, but that yes is not a fictional yes. It is a YES to love, gentleness, justice, unselfishness, kindness, friendships, faith, family. The second thing we learn from Mary is something she said at the wedding feast in Cana. *Go and do whatever He tells you*, meaning - follow Him. These are her last recorded words in the Gospels. It is dangerous for us to postpone all those yes's for the unknown tomorrow. Visiting the place of Mary and Joseph in Nazareth where only a few hundred people lived at that time brings us a message of simplicity and humbleness of heart. Outside the Annunciation Basilica we see many different images of Mary from different countries, those images show us the beauty of being Catholic. Being Catholic is to be universal. Being universal means belonging to something bigger than us. Nazareth is living proof of that. While in Nazareth we encountered a Croatian group on pilgrimage. It was a group of 40 people, primarily from Posusje, led by Fr. Milan Loncar. Yet again, we seem to keep making connections with people. Today the city of Nazareth has about 50,000 people, 55% Muslim, and 45% Christian. On our way down from the Basilica to the main street, we stopped at the town square where there is a huge billboard in Arabic and in English that states if you are not Muslim that you are a "loser". How disturbing!

Then we proceed to **Cana**, the place of the wedding feast, the only wedding feast Jesus attended. It is only about 5 miles east of Nazareth. A beautiful Franciscan church was built on the site. We have an outdoor chapel for ourselves where a beautiful event takes place, namely eleven couples from our group renew their marriage vows: Uremovic, Barun, Dusevic, Pesce, Fasching, Jovic, Vojvodic, Kosir, Bajic, Knezovic and Knutson. The men kiss their wives and promise 50 more years of faithful love! We even had a wedding cake provided by our bus driver, Walid, a Catholic Palestinian. We stopped for lunch in Cana, to eat falafel and shawarma sandwiches - AGAIN!!

After lunch we drive to **Mount Tabor**, the place of the **Transfiguration**. Our bus takes us half way up the mountain, but it is not able to maneuver the winding curves at the top half of the mountain, so we got into taxi vans that take us to the top. There is a beautiful church at the top of the mountain built by the Franciscans in the 1920's. Next to the church is the Franciscan monastery and an interesting place where they have a rehabilitation center for drug addicts. The church's roof is made of oak from Slavonia where I grew up. The view is breathtaking! This is where Jesus was Transfigured, appearing with Moses and Elijah to His disciples. The teaching moment here for us is that Jesus strengthened His disciples before the Passion by very powerful signs. Next to the church we could see the ruins of the 4th century church as well as the 12th century Benedictine monastery. On the right side of the church about 3-4 miles away, we see the village of Naim where Jesus raised the widow's son.

The view of the Israeli valley below us goes all the way to the Mediterranean Sea, to Haifa and Tel Aviv, and it tells the story of a very fertile land. Israel exports so many oranges and flowers, as well as other agricultural products. Then we got back in our taxi vans down to the midway point of the mountain, and get on our bus to go back to our hotel in Tiberius, back to the Sea of Galilee. The fishing boats are out, the moon is up half way across the sky. In the distance we see the lights that mark the villages of Tabgha, Capernaum, Migdal-Magdala (where Mary Magdalene came from), the Mount of Beatitudes. This day is a pure gift, which helps us to understand the past and the present, where the message and the teaching points are timeless.

It feels good to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, it feels even better to be a Christian, it feels the best to follow the Master. Very sincerely to those of you in Chicago or wherever you are, who don't have time to go to church on Sunday to meet Christ, think twice, think three times...

Day 10, Thursday, November 10, 2011

We started our Thursday morning by going to the **Church of the Primacy of Peter**, which is the place at the Sea of Galilee where the Risen Jesus met Peter, Nathaniel, Thomas, the two sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples. Jesus saw them fishing 100 yards from the shore and He prepared charcoal for the fish for their breakfast (John 21: 1-19). A simple, small, stone church commemorates that spot and within the church is the rock upon which Jesus prepared this meal for them. The Franciscans put a sign on this rock that says "Mensa Christi" which means "table of Christ." It is also the place where Jesus asked Peter three times whether he loved Him. When Peter proclaimed his love for Jesus, He told him "*feed my sheep, feed my lambs.*" Jesus forgave Peter for having denied Him three times at the house of Caiaphas and at the same time, He established Peter's place as the first among the Apostles, hence the name of this site as the Primacy of Peter. I preside at an outdoor Mass at 8:00 am, with the most beautiful view of the Sea of Galilee before us, just a few yards away. We are all transfixed by the scene before us, and the thoughts of the great events that happened on these shores 2000 years ago. After Mass, we walk the few steps down to the shore and wade in the waters of the Sea of Galilee. The water is nice and warm to our feet, and the rocks are still there. Peace is very present in great abundance. It is an amazing gift that we had the entire beach to ourselves for 40 minutes, before other busloads of pilgrims arrived. Immediately adjacent to the church, right on the beach, there are some rocky steps that are called the steps of the Apostles, because that is the place where the Apostles gathered. It is a very powerful place, made all the more powerful by the great simplicity found there. A simple church built over a rock, a beach, waves gently rolling onto the shore, rocks, stone steps. A feeling of fulfillment and contentment in the air. I took some rocks from the Sea to bring home with me. I will bring the biggest one to St. Jerome to place on the altar. As we were walking around the beach gathering our rocks and shells, suddenly I saw a familiar face - Fr. Ed, a Benedictine priest from St. James, a parish only seven blocks from St. Jerome's! He was there with a group as well! I also met a woman named Rita from Arizona, who heard me speak at a conference in Phoenix. This Holy Land truly seems to be a place of many encounters!

After spending time at shore of the Sea of Galilee, we get on the bus and take a long ride up to the Golan Heights, which has been occupied by Israel since 1967. We come to a place called Caesarea Philippi, the place where Jesus said to Peter "you are Petros, the Rock, upon which I will build my Church". Only by coming here do we understand why He said "rock" because there is a HUGE red rock which is about 100 feet high, that reflects strength and power. In ancient times, this was a place where temples to pagan gods were located (to Pan and others), in addition to being a place where a Roman palace once stood. The ruins of these structures are still very visible. Jesus brings His Apostles to this place, which was dedicated to the worship of false gods, and tells them that He is building a NEW CHURCH, and that Peter will be the ROCK of that Church. Interestingly enough everything is gone except the ruins of those temples and palaces, but the message, the Church and the presence of Jesus remains. The false gods are long forgotten, but Jesus is eternal and ever present. The Gospel passage about this encounter and Jesus' commissioning of Peter to be the Rock is found in John 21:1-19. Again we see how intentional Jesus was. He specifically went to this place, which must have taken several days to walk to, to tell Peter about his new role in the Church that Jesus was establishing. Once again this land is rightly called the fifth Gospel. When you read the Gospel texts in the very site where it happened, it makes perfect sense.

After that, we get back on the bus, going south back down through the Golan Heights. The Golan Heights is an area that is about 60 km long and 13 km wide. It is filled with fertile fields of avocados, oranges, dates, pomegranates, apples, figs, wheat and barley. After having seen it, we can now understand why in Biblical times they called this place the land of milk and honey. We stop for lunch in a Druze village, which is a Muslim sect, quite different from the other Muslims we have been seeing. At the restaurant, I have another interesting encounter. I see the pastor of St. Bridget Church in Rockford, Illinois, where Fr. Ivan and I go once a month to celebrate Mass for the Croatian community there.

Our next stop is an observation post that is a few hundred yards from the Israeli border with Syria. In front of us, on a plateau is the Syrian border, behind us on a hill is an Israeli military post, and between the two is a United Nations camp. The fence or dividing line is very close to where we are standing. Everybody is fighting for this piece of land.

The last site we will visit in the Sea of Galilee area is Kursi, the place where Jesus encountered a demoniac, and expelled the demons into a herd of swine, which then ran over the cliffs to the Sea. It is interesting that in the Gospels, it says that this place is "on the other side" of the Sea of Galilee. It is a powerful image to see that on one side of the Sea is the beautiful message of the Mount of Beatitudes, and on the other side is the "evil side" where Jesus expelled the demons. The church was built in the 4th century to commemorate this event. It is a strange feeling here... Even now... You can read about this event in Matthew 8:23-33.

Day 11, Friday, November 11, 2011

Today is our last day in the Holy Land. After breakfast, we load our luggage on the bus, and check out of the Leonardo Plaza hotel (which by the way was excellent, and whose hospitality was superb). Before driving west to the Mediterranean Sea, we return to the Mount of Beatitudes one last time, where Fr. Ivan presides at a beautiful outdoor Mass, on the very hill where Jesus gave his famous Sermon on the Mount. As I was listening to Fr. Ivan's homily, a man begins waving to me from short distance away. I walked over to him. He said he remembers me from the Conference in California. Wow!

The view from this mountain toward the Sea of Galilee is breathtaking, a playground of the sun, water and the hills. When the light of the sun hits the Sea of Galilee you see countless rays spreading out and shimmering on the Sea. It is quite a picture, which reminds me of an old saying "when the sun touches the earth, life begins". The Sermon on the Mount which was spoken here on this very place still echoes around the globe on each continent and in peoples hearts. We say our final goodbye to Galilee, the home of Jesus' public ministry and the place of most of His teaching. The feeling is like saying goodbye to your own home or family. There is something that deeply connects us to these places, villages, hills, roads, ruins and the Sea.

We travel across the state of Israel going west towards Haifa. We see many fertile fields and very rich countryside. We arrive in Haifa which is the home of Israel's main shipyard. It is a city on the Mediterranean coast with many modern buildings, business's and industry. The headquarters and the main temple of the Baha'i faith are located here. They are present in Chicago as well, in the suburb of Wilmette. We drive up to the big hill above the city where the beautiful church of Stella Maris is located, the home of the Carmelites, the home of the scapular, the home of many beginnings. The church is beautiful with a cave inside of it, which is believed to be one of the caves where the prophet Elijah used to hide. Then after having lunch at another Druze restaurant, which is located on the same mountain range of Carmel, our next stop is a Carmelite church of the Prophet Elijah, where it is believed he offered sacrifice. The story of pagan gods and Elijah's role in slaying the false prophets is commemorated here. Above the church there is a beautiful observation deck from where we can see half of Israel, all the way to Nazareth, Mount Tabor, towards Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Now we are on our way to the Mediterranean Sea, to Ceasarea Meritima. Herod the Great built this city, which has a big harbor that connected this city to Rome, as well as having built a coliseum and a very impressive aqueduct. St. Paul was imprisoned here for 2 years, and from here he went to Rome, where he was martyred. The ride along the Mediterranean Sea is beautiful. I oftentimes try to imagine how the Apostles, in the time of Jesus and after, traveled this land as well as the whole Mediterranean region all the way to Rome. It is an impressive land with unique topography and a most intriguing history. It feels like the whole world somehow connects here and is involved in the past and future of this land. We had this amazing gift to come, to travel, to see, to experience, to connect and reconnect. Ultimately our life depends on how we connect to its origins. To the Lord. These short observations are just bits and pieces of what this land offers and of what we can take into ourselves. We arrive in Tel Aviv shortly and check into our final hotel, the Dan Panorama, located right on the Mediterranean Sea. But we will only be here for a few hours, since we have to leave for the airport in the very early hours of the morning. We have an amazing dinner. Some go to sleep for a few hours, others prefer to stay awake until our departure time.

Day 12, Saturday, November 12, 2011

At 1:30 am we leave for Ben Gurion international airport to head back home. Our lives are forever changed. Our hearts are full. We have been deeply touched by this Land, most Holy! Along the way, we have encountered many people, both from the past and the present, for this seems to be the land of encounters. We have encountered Mary, the Apostles, and the many characters we read about in the Scriptures, and we have learned many lessons from them. We have encountered the present day inhabitants of this land and seen first hand the realities and the difficulties of life in Israel. We have had chance encounters with numerous people from back home. We have encountered ourselves more deeply, in the solitude and intimacy of our own hearts. And most importantly we have encountered Jesus, who is the reason for our coming here in the first place. May that encounter with Him create within us a deeper passion for our life of faith, and may it lead us to a life of greater love. We will treasure these memories forever.

Walking in the Holy Land is an exceptional experience. To enter Jerusalem, which is full of history and symbols, is a big event. To stand at the western gate, to walk Jesus' way of the cross, to come to Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives or to stand amid the ruins of Siloam is a major experience.

To pass through Jericho and enter the Judean desert and feel what it means to live in the desert, and to imagine fasting many days, means to read the Bible with new eyes.

And then to go to Galilee! To visit the villages and towns where Christ taught, to enter the synagogue where he spoke

to the Jews about the Kingdom of God, means to learn anew and hear anew.

To come to the Jordan River which flows even today, means to come to the source, to understand more deeply the Biblical texts, and to strengthen our will to follow his teachings.

A journey to Israel is different from all other journeys.

If you ever have the opportunity to go either to the Holy Land or to any other destination in the whole world, choose the Holy Land. You won't regret it. You will have the opportunity to become a new person and persevere in powerful hope to the end.

May our journey be a blessing for all of you! We carried all of you with us. In spirit, you walked with us in every part of that interesting land, in every place along Christ's earthly journey.